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“WHO CARES A BUTTON”?
***WOMEN IN LOVE* AND THE QUESTION OF SCALE**

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The bride has arrived, but no bridegroom. In the opening chapter of *Women in Love* the local community gathers in the church at Willey Green and the atmosphere is soon tense and expectant. D. H. Lawrence makes Ursula the focal point of the nervous energy of the congregation, her heart “strained with anxiety” that “the wedding would yet all go wrong” (WL 19, 15). These fears are subsequently allayed by the belated arrival of Lupton with his best man, Rupert Birkin, who explains: “‘I’m sorry we are so late ... We couldn’t find a button-hook, so it took us a long time to button our boots’” (WL 20). The absurdity of the button-hook, a banal implement endowed with the potential to undo the bond of the lovers, the union of two local families and the gathering together of the wider community, is heightened by Birkin’s cumbersome tautology. Lawrence presents the reader with a discrepancy of scale, first by establishing an insufficient objective correlative as the cause of “intolerable” disruption (WL 19), and then by providing a superfluous level of detail about what would usually be considered an unremarkable item. There is a surplus of deficiency at work in that Birkin’s button-hook gestures, in a larger sense, to the conscious undoing of convention. Right from the outset Lawrence negates the possibility of a tool capable of fastening the intricate and at times irreconcilable elements of the text together.

In a disparaging comment made to Gerald after the ceremony, Birkin recalls that “Lupton would talk about the immortality of the soul ... and then we hadn’t got a button-hook” (WL 31). Yet while it is Birkin who highlights the irregular proportions of the incident, he is characterised moments earlier as exhibiting an “innate incongruity which caused a slight ridiculousness in his appearance”

(WL 20). Equally, Lawrence himself is frequently criticised for his attempts to “describe the indescribable” and for his “lapse[s] into ponderous, melodramatic floridity”.¹ I want to examine this bathos of scale in *Women in Love*, particularly in relation to small and seemingly incongruous parts of speech. Leo Bersani notes “the sudden shifts of language in *Women in Love* – shifts which may puzzle or irritate us – from the prosaic to the extravagant”,² but it is the reversal of this pattern, the frequent shifts from extravagant to prosaic language, that has yet to be pinned down.

One of the main objections raised against Lawrence’s use of language is that he “buttonholes” his reader.³ The frequency with which Lawrence’s writing proposes and subsequently negates a fixed viewpoint, however, suggests that contradiction is a consistent feature of his work. Carl Krockel has therefore aptly noted that Lawrence “takes up contradictory positions in his novels as a deliberate strategy to achieve a dynamic expression of reality”.⁴ Pushing this idea further, I believe that Lawrence’s adornment of the fabric of *Women in Love* with contradiction is part of a strategy of self-satire whereby the author establishes in order to undermine the world-view that the text so adamantly proposes. As I will go on to suggest, the technique is that of tension and release and the effect is often comical, with viewpoints of characters, Birkin in particular, introduced with such vigour and conviction that when they are then dismissed or mocked there is an underlying sense of relief, as if the reader has been let off from attending to a particularly intense sermon. The act of self-satire achieves the opposite of buttonholing or detaining the reader, who instead is released from the constraints of a fixed and totalising view of reality.⁵ Indeed, if Lawrence is consistent in anything it is in his belief that he should not “subject the intensity of [his] vision – or whatever it is” (note the evasion of fixed categories here) to “some vast and imposing rhythm” (5L 201), instead encouraging a “dance of opposites” (WL 153).⁶ Lawrence’s foreword to the novel, written in 1919, affirms this dialogical routine through negation, defining the “struggle for verbal consciousness” as “*not* superimposition of the theory” (WL

486, emphasis added). As a result, Lawrence's vision remains localised, never overlooking the minor level of the sentence, with the author favouring a nuanced, albeit contradictory, perspective to any degree of finality.

All the major characters in *Women in Love* experience seismic moments of recognition at the level of the sentence. In utterances such as Birkin's disparaging "Lupton would talk about the immortality of the soul" feelings of grandiosity are suddenly plunged into pettiness – "but then he hadn't got a button-hook" – as reality is exposed to be disappointingly trivial. A clue to this attitude can be found in a letter Lawrence wrote to J. B. Pinker in 1914, in which he admitted: "I am glad of the war. It sets a slump in trifling" (2L 240). This statement is laced with contradiction, with war exerting a gravitational pull on Lawrence, a sense of the weight of responsibility that accompanies the threat of invasion, at the same time that it elevates him and his fellow citizens beyond the realm of a trivial existence. More specifically, Lawrence suggests that the war has elevated the reading public beyond the shallow confines of the "popular novel", with him equating the seriousness of the conflict with a cultural trend for reading "more deeply and strongly".⁷ By 1917, however, *Women in Love* had undergone a series of complex and densely layered revisions and "the bitterness of the war" was now no longer a force capable of infusing life with significance (WL 485). If anything, Lawrence's 1919 foreword to the final version of the text suggests that war was increasingly "taken for granted" as part of the banal and constrained reality of everyday life (WL 485).

Another explanation for the sinking pattern at work in the language of *Women in Love* is that Lawrence is responding to what he perceived to be a crisis of scale in the contemporary novel. In an essay published shortly after *Women in Love*, Lawrence lampoons the privileging of mundane detail. After outlining the way in which contemporaries such as James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson cultivate a field of vision based purely on microscopic or even

solipsistic detail at the expense of a broader perspective, Lawrence asserts that this kind of novel is

Absorbedly, childishly concerned with *What I am*. "I am this, I am that, I am the other. My reactions are such, and such, and such. And oh Lord, if I liked to watch myself closely enough, if I liked to analyse my feelings, minutely, as I unbutton my pants, instead of saying crudely I unbuttoned them, then I could go on to a million pages instead of a thousand" ...

The people in serious novels are so absorbedly concerned with themselves and how they feel and don't feel, and how they react to every mortal trouser-button ... (*STH* 152)⁸

To a certain extent this "mortal ... button" is an arbitrary figure, a synecdochic focal point for the cumulative weight of pedantic detail that Lawrence feels is receiving too great an emphasis in "serious novels". Yet as with Birkin's misplaced "button-hook" the figure of the button plays an unexpectedly significant role in Lawrence's laying bare of his literary peers. An object designed "for use or ornament", the button is both an integral feature and a decorative appendage.⁹ I want to fasten these categories together in relation to Jacques Lacan's definition of the "point de capiton", or upholstery button, an image he uses to define parts of language that generate points of illusory stability amid the process of signification.¹⁰ Just as upholstery buttons pin down material and grant form to the content beneath the surface, Lacan suggests that certain words appear to forge a stable tie between signifier and the signified, reinforcing the shape of language as a whole. Lawrence made his own furniture, and as a result he may have known that upholstery buttons are connected to one another but not to the underlying frame of the furniture, making them extraneous and to a certain degree autonomous parts of a given structure.¹¹ Crucially, this kind of button sinks into the fabric while at the same time protruding out from it. As I will attempt to demonstrate, the "upholstery buttons" of *Women in Love* are the points where Lawrence's language draws

attention to what it is attempting to suppress, namely the principle of contradiction and, at its furthest extreme, self-negation.

Unsurprisingly, Lawrence's method of frustrating readers in their attempts to fix upon a point of illusory stability within the text is itself contradictory. As critics of *Women in Love* have observed, Lawrence draws the eye of the reader towards the repetition of individual words in speech or thought. Identifying the recurrence of certain words, each time in a slightly altered context, helps the reader to isolate sudden tonal shifts from extravagant to prosaic subject matter. Yet, paradoxically, repetition is consistently utilised as a mark of tonal inconsistency. Tone pertains to voice, and it is while speaking, particularly when discussing an idea with another person, that Lawrence's characters are most likely to change their minds or reach a point of recognition. Lawrence signals how, when an individual is forced to consider their perspective in relation to someone else, telescopic vision, which apprehends the vast expanses of the world and the distances beyond, is recalibrated as microscopic vision, in which the individual realises with horror that reality is actually smaller and more oppressively immediate than was previously thought. These shifts reflect the broader vacillations between what two keen-eyed readers of Lawrence, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, term the molar and the molecular forces that underpin the experiences of the individual.¹² It is possible to observe the interaction between these structures at a micro-level during a conversation between Birkin and Ursula, in which the pair openly debate the terms of their feelings for one another for the first time. Birkin explains:

"I want to find you, where you don't know your own existence, the you that your common self denies utterly. But I don't want your good looks, and I don't want your womanly feelings, and I don't want your thoughts nor opinions nor your ideas – they are all bagatelles to me."

“You are very conceited, Monsieur,” she mocked. “How do you know what my womanly feelings are, or my thoughts or my ideas? You don’t even know what I think of you now.”

“Nor do I care in the slightest.”

“I think you are very silly. I think you want to tell me you love me, and you go all this way round to do it.”

“All right,” he said, looking up with sudden exasperation. “Now go away then, and leave me alone. I don’t want any more of your meretricious persiflage.”

“Is it really persiflage?” she mocked, her face really relaxing into laughter. She interpreted it, that he had made a deep confession of love to her. But he was so absurd in his words, also.

...“What I want is a strange conjunction with you –” he said quietly; “– not meeting and mingling; – you are quite right: – but an equilibrium, a pure balance of two single beings: – as the stars balance each other.”

She looked at him. He was very earnest, and earnestness was always rather ridiculous, commonplace, to her. It made her feel unfree and uncomfortable. Yet she liked him so much. But why drag in the stars! (WL 147–8)

Here Lawrence establishes what becomes an ingrained opposition in the novel between Birkin’s attempts to expand the terms of his feelings onto a larger scale and Ursula’s deflationary counter-responses. Birkin begins by anatomising Ursula’s “good looks” and “womanly feelings” in order to dismiss these gendered, even clichéd, features of her “common self” that he feels are obstructing his efforts to sublimate their relationship beyond the everyday. Birkin’s aesthetic framework is undeniably telescopic, his vision of star-equilibrium cosmological. If Birkin is modelled on Lawrence then Ursula is a dialogic foil, grounding his lofty ideals with the aid of the gravitational pull of bathos. The above passage highlights Ursula’s determination to unbalance Birkin by cutting across his totalising constellations and mocking his grandiose concepts.

Intriguingly however, by establishing this meiotic counterweight, Lawrence elevates the text into the playful realm of meta-commentary. By using Ursula to trivialise Birkin's outlook Lawrence telescopes out from a singular perspective, situating his narrow world-view within a broader and more inhospitable context. In the spirit of contradiction, cutting Birkin down to size becomes a means for Lawrence to expand the scope of the text beyond the confines of a fixed and totalising vision.

Why is Ursula "uncomfortable" with Birkin's analogy, given that it exalts her above "common" life and beyond her human proportions? Perhaps it is because she rather astutely recognises that Birkin's stars are an illusory projection, the product of a necessarily limited outlook. Stars are fixed points that anchor the gaze and enable individuals to orient themselves; in this sense they are the upholstery buttons of the sky. Stars are also extremely distant which means they are necessarily diminished in scale, and as a result the mind is unable to apprehend these retreating forms as a tangible reality. Figured as a star, Ursula is pinned down, reduced and abstracted simultaneously by Birkin. Her immediate response is therefore to bulge out in a different direction in order to address the parts of her self that are being elided by this "conceit".

Ursula's resistance to Birkin's vision, and Birkin's objection to Ursula's dismissiveness, is part of a broader conversation about oppressive power structures. Deleuze and Guattari argue that: "the stronger the molar organization is, the more it induces a molecularization of its own elements, relations and elementary apparatuses. When the machine becomes planetary or cosmic, there is an increasing tendency for assemblages to miniaturize, to become micro assemblages".¹³ The concept of molecularization is closely linked to the meiotic strategies that underpin *Women in Love*, particularly in relation to sexual desire. However, in an earlier study Deleuze and Guattari argue that Lawrence felt psychoanalysis "was shutting sexuality up in a bizarre sort of box painted with bourgeois motifs, in a kind of rather repugnant artificial triangle, thereby stifling the whole of sexuality as a production of desire".¹⁴ One

cannot help but think of the emblem of the button in this reference to “bourgeois motifs” and it is necessary to pause at this juncture to consider this resemblance as a warning against the potentially miniaturising aesthetic of my own argument. If, for Lawrence, the application of the psychoanalytic model of thought reduces sexuality from a limitless and uncontrollable life force to a “dirty little secret” (*LEA* 250) then by focusing solely on the libidinal undercurrents of this exchange I risk stifling the creative energy of *Women in Love* as a whole. It seems obvious, however, that in the above passage Ursula is trivialising Birkin’s macro-analogy as a reaction against his attempt to assimilate her into a traditionally masculine molar apparatus. She does this by interrogating Birkin, asking him “How do you know what my womanly feelings are”, before dismissing his circuitous methods as “silly”. Ironically, Ursula’s feelings are encapsulated by a question assimilated by Lawrence into the narrative discourse: “why drag in the stars!” (*WL* 148). The absence of conventional punctuation confirms that Ursula is not really questioning Birkin’s theory: instead the incongruous exclamation mark confirms her emphatic disagreement. The clipped, monosyllabic diction that defines Ursula’s economy of speech transforms Birkin’s image of excess into its opposite, a negation. The telescopic image becomes microscopic, now almost imperceptible and thus ineffective. Consequently, Lawrence ironises Birkin’s vision of “balance” through the balancing of these oppositional perspectives: too much becomes the equivalent of too little. This is itself a kind of double vision, with Lawrence pressing irony into service in order to bring the opposing views of Birkin and Ursula together, achieving a degree of bifocal cooperation between the pair.

Birkin’s response to Ursula’s deflationary tactics is to inflate his diction, referring to her dismissal of him as “meretricious persiflage”, or, to put it plainly, empty mockery.¹⁵ Ursula’s pushing of Birkin’s buttons here results in an undeniably comic instance of libidinal loquaciousness.¹⁶ A clear “point de capiton”, Birkin’s sudden engorgement of diction bulges out from the fabric of the

text and forces the reader to interrogate unconscious motivation. Birkin feels emasculated by Ursula's dismissal of him as "silly" or slight, and this causes him to respond with an aggressive turgidity to her teasing. It is difficult to overlook the rich, affirmative texture of this negation, particularly as it immediately follows his taut, rather infantile request for her to "go away and leave me alone". This sudden shift from terseness to floridity is conspicuous because it is so obviously deformed by desire. Consequently, while "meretricious" may mean "without value", Lawrence affirms the value of this utterance in the context of an intimate conversation.

A similar bulge in the fabric of Birkin's speech during this exchange is the term "bagatelle", another piece of inflated diction used to reduce an object or person to nothing. Invoked in this context, bagatelle means "something of little value or significance", a mere trifle, and yet the term aggrandises the speaker, establishing a contrast between form and function. Curiously, the word "bagatelle" refers to an actual game as well as a "game-like literary tool used in fiction" in which an author "empowers a character or object *beyond* natural or expected abilities" (emphasis added).¹⁷ The term is thus a locus for the contradiction of scale at work in *Women in Love*, through which, as Fiona Becket argues, "single phrases signal subliminal levels of thought at work across the entire narrative and interacting with further levels".¹⁸ However, Becket's reading does not go as far as acknowledging that these levels counteract as well as interact with one another – a game that the text plays with its reader.

Women in Love and *The Rainbow* were initially conceived as a single text provisionally titled *The Sisters*. The word "bagatelle" first appears in the earlier of the two novels when Anna Brangwen adopts "one of her mother's rare phrases" (R 94). Its rarity is confirmed by the fact that Lawrence only uses the term on one other occasion in the two texts. In another rather grandiose assertion towards the end of *Women in Love*, a German sculptor, Loerke, informs Gudrun: "What one does in one's art, that is the breath of one's being. What one does in one's life, that is a

bagatelle for the outsiders to fuss about” (WL 448). Again, an inversion of scale is taking place, with life relegated to a mere cause of “fuss”, another “mortal ... button” (STH 152) in contrast to art as an ontological totality. Loerke’s assertion induces a kind of epiphany in Gudrun, who immediately seizes hold of his word to define her realisation that “Of course Gerald was *bagatelle*” (WL 448, original emphasis). The transfer is both linguistic and erotic: if “bagatelle” is also a literary device used to expand an individual or object beyond expected ability, the term is here rendered complicit in Loerke’s increasing eminence in Gudrun’s field of vision. Intriguingly, Gudrun’s realisation that Gerald is nothing to her coincides with her encounter with the word that encapsulates the feeling she had been struggling to pin down. Loerke’s “bagatelle” furnishes her with a dual sense of definition, firstly by providing her with a point of reference for her as yet unarticulated sense that Gerald no longer means anything to her, and secondly by enabling her to reach the defining moment that, as a result of this revelation, “Of course” she can dispense with him as though he were nothing. To emphasise this point further, Lawrence italicises the word for the first time, setting it apart like a button upon the fabric of Gudrun’s thought that she now presses decisively.

As well as signalling stress, italicising a word also denotes its foreignness and unfamiliarity. Bagatelle has been naturalised into the English language, but like other loan words it was lifted from another language (in this case from both French and Italian) and inserted into the vocabulary to fill a hole or cover a threadbare section of English. Itself a diminutive form of “bagata”, meaning “little possession”,¹⁹ its definition has expanded over time, all the while remaining limited to a rather narrow social demographic – one of Gerald’s miners would never use such a “rare phrase” (R 94). In a far more overt sense than with Birkin’s star-equilibrium, Gudrun’s use of bagatelle expands her dominion over Gerald while at the same time diminishing his role in her life and rendering him extraneous. Her appropriation of Loerke’s vocabulary is part of a game of bagatelle (more commonly known as bar-billiards)

between these soon-to-be lovers in which they find themselves “tossing about the little coloured balls of verbal humour and whimsicality” and “enjoying a pure game” (WL 468). This verbal playfulness, however, is part of a much more significant trifling with ethical codes: the adulteration of speech at this point in the narrative anticipates the ease with which Gudrun tosses Gerald aside in order to become involved with a new lover.

Although Gudrun is certainly not the only character to be subjected to ethical scrutiny by the text, she perhaps suffers the most acutely from a distortion of scale. As Hermione (herself a richly contradictory figure) rightly observes, Gudrun has a tendency to look at the world “through the wrong end of the opera glasses” (WL 39). But unlike Hermione, Gudrun is a new kind of woman emerging into a vastly altered world; it would be difficult for her to take Birkin’s advice to “chop the world down to fit yourself” since for Gudrun all things are in a state of flux (WL 205). And yet for Lawrence, having a finely tuned sense of scale, however contradictory, is an integral part of being human. Ontology is spatialised in *Women in Love*: characters lose their sense of scale when they are unable to measure themselves against a fixed and stable point. Lawrence highlights the inability of characters to maintain a sense of perspective during a brief exchange between Birkin and Gerald about the impending death of Gerald’s father. Birkin reflects:

“No death doesn’t really seem to be the point anymore ... It’s like an ordinary tomorrow.”

... Gerald narrowed his eyes, his face was cool and unscrupulous as he looked at Birkin, impersonally, with a vision that ended in a point in space, strangely keen-eyed and yet blind.

“If death isn’t the point,” he said, in a strangely abstract, cold, fine, voice – “what is?” (WL 204)

Gerald’s struggle to focus his eyes corresponds to the absence of a “point” of significance to which he may orient his existence. The

effect is a contradictory gaze that is “keen-eyed and yet blind” as well as a voice that is both “abstract” and “fine”. Lawrence punctuates the passage with the word “point”, a “point de capiton” that shifts between a figurative import in the first and third instance, and a literal denotation in the phrase “a point in space”. In this instance, repetition only serves to emphasise the simultaneous vagueness and precision of the term. The underlying anxiety for both men is that existence is somehow pointless, and Gerald’s final question remains unanswered. What is marked about this moment is the way that Gerald’s gaze begins to drift, as though his sensation of losing his balance on a larger, existential plane means that he can no longer anchor himself on a local level in the present moment. Yet this works both ways: in *Women in Love* the micro-scale and the macro-scale pivot on the same fine point.

When the larger scale is disturbed by events at a more immediate level, the consequences are severe. Through Gudrun and Gerald, Lawrence compels us to consider what might happen when small, fairly insignificant gestures of indifference or cruelty begin to expand into broader ethical frameworks. Gudrun’s dismissal of Gerald is part of a broader gesture of negation in relation to which she asks herself:

And who can take political England seriously? Who can? Who can care a straw, really, how the old, patched-up Constitution is tinkered at any more? Who cares a button for our national ideas, any more than for our national bowler hat? Aha, it is all old hat, it is all old bowler hat? (WL 419)

As Gudrun’s disenchantment with life expands its proportions beyond the personal and into the political she responds with increasingly totalising meiotic strategies. Gudrun’s despondency about her failing relationship with Gerald rapidly expands its dominion into the realm of political vexation. Here we reach the pinnacle of her disillusionment, with England diminished and tossed about by a mind that ricochets from the flimsy image of a

straw to a tired bowler hat, via the “mortal ... button”.²⁰ Lawrence’s use of interrogatives signals Gudrun’s pursuit of a pithy and definitive put down, the perfect analogy to which she can pin her disillusionment and yet keep it detached from herself like a useful accessory. However, in a key instance of “slightly modified repetition” (WL 486), Gudrun wrestles to get hold of her material: the hat analogy expands and contracts, it is both specific symbol and a general sensation. The final result, “it is all old bowler hat”, is an apt observation and yet like Birkin’s button-hook announcement it is also a curiously baggy assertion. Lawrence is exposing Gudrun’s inability to suppress her cares as well as her failure to neatly negate reality when it becomes undesirable to her. As with Birkin’s “meretricious persiflage”, it becomes clear that the more characters attempt to reduce life to nothing, the more obvious it becomes just how invested they are in living. Throughout this rather patched-up analogy, Gudrun cannot help but wear her contradictions on her sleeve.

It is hard to take Gudrun’s vision of political England seriously, and her threadbare analogy is endearingly bathetic. However, it is important to maintain a sense of proportion when reading *Women in Love*, a text founded on a dense layering of disproportions. Lawrence is doing more than simply satirising Gudrun’s regressive advance towards a total negation of reality, for Gudrun is part of a greater whole, however much she would like to deny any involvement in “political England”. In fact, her lover Gerald’s reductive strategies constitute a serious threat to life at a wider level. Adopting a sweeping, telescopic perspective, Lawrence outlines how, as part of his role as industrial magnate, Gerald

cut down the expenditure, in ways so fine as to be hardly noticeable to the men. The miners must pay for the cartage of their coals, heavy cartage too; they must pay for their tools, for the sharpening, for the care of lamps, for many trifling things that made the bill of charges against every man mount up to a shilling or so in the week. (WL 230)

In the same way that Deleuze and Guattari foreground the fragile fault lines between molar and molecular structures, Lawrence's emphasis on these finer, "hardly noticeable" details foregrounds the way in which seismic shifts to the social and economic circumstances of the individual occur when "many trifling things" are overlooked before "mount[ing] up" into something major (WL 230). Gerald's treatment of the miners is thus a small-scale model of Lawrence's perception of the minoritisation of the individual, who is chipped away bit by bit by the finer implements of industrial capitalism.

Gerald and Gudrun's actions should not be reduced to a scale of magnitude. There is no essential difference between Gerald's treatment of the miners and Gudrun's tendency to "draw two lines under [Birkin] and cross him out like an account that is settled" (WL 263). Just as Ursula is horrified by this "finality of Gudrun's, this dispatching of people and things in a sentence", so is Lawrence holding the reader to account, asking us to think about the way that the treatment of "people and things" at the minor level is part of the same "finality" of vision that reduces men to "little unimportant phenomena" (WL 231).

Unlike an account book, *Women in Love* does not participate in a currency of efficiency, and therefore has no need to cut down on its expenditure. While the meiotic strategies of the main characters comprise acts of scaling down and even of total negation, the underlying principle of the text contradicts this process. In his 1925 essay 'Why the Novel Matters' Lawrence asserts that "only in the novel are *all* things given full play" (STH 198, original emphasis). While other discourses (he lists philosophy and science here as two examples) are highly selective and concern themselves only with the seemingly useful aspects of life, in the novel "The whole is a strange assembly of apparently incongruous parts, slipping past one another" (STH 196). Lawrence's reference to "incongruous parts" fondly recalls the absent implement that delays the marital union. Even in isolation this phrase confirms the value of attending to the extraneous and yet somehow insistent little features of the text. It is

incongruity that creates the energy or the life force of the text, enabling readers such as myself to recognise the importance of even the most insignificant object. It is the matter, the little “parts”, or, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, the “micro assemblages” of *Women in Love* that account for the question of precisely *why* the Lawrentian novel matters.

Returning to the absent button-hook, I am reminded not to attempt to tie up this argument too neatly, for *Women in Love* lacks the expediency of a tool with which to bring the whole together. Instead, using albeit rather constrained figures – namely buttons and bagatelle – I have made the claim that Lawrence resists a constrained and totalising vision, favouring instead a more nuanced and at times contradictory perspective. The reader is encouraged to become closely attuned to the subtle tonal discrepancies and seemingly insignificant parts of speech that together furnish the text with a major part of its meaning. Most importantly, Lawrence presents us with an ethical imperative, emphasising the importance of “car[ing] a button” by scaling up the minor (miner) and increasingly marginalised aspects of individual existence, and in turn foregrounding the finer details that denote that care.

¹ James Wood, ‘Heavenly Creatures’, Review of *The Rainbow*, in *The Guardian*, Saturday 10 March 2007, [accessed 18 April 2014] <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/mar/10/fiction.dhlawrence>>

² Leo Bersani, ‘Lawrentian Stillness’, in *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (London: Marion Boyars: 1978), 164.

³ See Peter Preston and Peter Hoare, eds, *D. H. Lawrence in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 36; Frederick George and Thomas Bridgham, eds, *The First World War as a Clash of Cultures*, (London: Camden House, 2006), 10; Ron Padgett, ‘D. H. Lawrence’, in *World Poets: Gerald Manley Hopkins – William Shakespeare* (London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2000), 73.

⁴ Carl Krockel, *D. H. Lawrence and Germany: The Politics of Influence* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 10.

⁵ I am thinking here of the nineteenth-century omniscient narrator in novels such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* or Jane Austen's *Emma*.

⁶ There are a number of dialogical readings of D. H. Lawrence that have informed my approach to *Women in Love*. See Avrom Fleishman, 'Lawrence and Bakhtin: Where Pluralism Ends and Dialogism Begins', in *Rethinking Lawrence*, ed. Keith Brown (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open UP, 1990), 109–19; David Lodge, 'Lawrence, Dostoyevsky, Bakhtin: D. H. Lawrence and dialogic fiction', in Brown, *Rethinking Lawrence*, 92–108; Barbara Schapiro, *D. H. Lawrence and the Paradoxes of Psychic Life* (New York: State U of New York P, 1999).

⁷ In a letter to J. B. Pinker, dated 5 December 1914, Lawrence writes: "I am glad of this war. It kicks the pasteboard bottom in the usual 'good' popular novel. People have felt much more deeply and strongly these past few months, and they are not going to let themselves be taken in by 'serious' works whose feeling is shallower than that of the official army reports" (2L 240).

⁸ I have abridged this statement, which contains further repetitions of the words "button" and "unbutton". The choice of object could also be a reference to Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914).

⁹ "button, n.", *OED Online*, March 2014 [accessed 17 April, 2014] <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/25440?rskey=s8LWjB&result=3&isAdvanced=false>

¹⁰ "Whether it be a sacred text, a novel, a play, a monologue, or any conversation whatsoever, allow me to represent the function of the signifier by a spatializing device ... This Point around which all concrete analysis of discourse must operate I shall call quilting point ... Everything radiates from and is organised round this signifier, similar to those little lines of force that an upholstery button forms on the surface of material". Lacan goes on to describe the divided form of signifier and signified as that which gives rise to libidinal disorders. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Jacques-Alain Miller and Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1993), 243–4.

¹¹ Keith Sagar, *D. H. Lawrence, A Calendar of his Works* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1979), 70.

¹² Deleuze and Guattari characterise molar structures as the larger tangible forces that determine the fate of individuals such as the church or the state, and molecular structures as the more imperceptible factors that

shape the life of the individual such as belief or desire. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury Revelations, 2013). See also Malene Busk, 'Micropolitics: A Political Philosophy from Marx and Beyond', in *Micropolitics of Media Culture: Reading the Rhizomes of Deleuze and Guattari*, eds Patricia Pisters and Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2001), 113–4.

¹³ Ibid., 215.

¹⁴ "D. H. Lawrence had the impression – that psychoanalysis was shutting sexuality up in a bizarre sort of box painted with bourgeois motifs, in a kind of rather repugnant artificial triangle, thereby stifling the whole of sexuality as a production of desire so as to recast it along entirely different lines, making of it a 'dirty little secret', a dirty little family secret, a private theater rather than the fantastic factory of nature and production": Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983), 49.

¹⁵ The *OED* defines the latinate "meretricious" as "superficially attractive but having in reality no value or integrity", as well as "having the value or character of a prostitute", which suggests that there is a strong sexual undercurrent to Birkin's sudden use of this term. "meretricious, adj. and n.", *OED Online* (Oxford UP) [accessed September 13, 2014], <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/116755?redirectedFrom=meretricious>.

¹⁶ Lacan followed Freud in maintaining that the libido was comprised of sexual energy that was essentially dualistic in opposing itself to a non-sexual energy. Lacan also contended that the libido was exclusively masculine and it is in this sense that Birkin's libidinal energy opposes itself to Ursula's non-libidinal energy. See Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2006), 103.

¹⁷ "bagatelle, n.", *OED Online*, September 2014 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/14618?redirectedFrom=bagatelle> [accessed 20 October, 2014]. For a definition of bagatelle as a literary device see "bagatelle (literary technique)", *Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias* <<http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/1320549>> [accessed 20 October, 2014].

¹⁸ Fiona Becket, *D. H. Lawrence: The Thinker as Poet* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 153.

¹⁹ "bagatelle, n.", *OED Online*, March 2014 [accessed 18 April, 2014] <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/14618?redirectedFrom=bagatelle>>.

²⁰ Here Gudrun tinkers with the image of the bowler hat, seemingly a metonym for mass conformity coupled with social aspiration and patriarchal conservatism, and affixes it to the idiom “old hat”, which refers to something dated or outmoded.